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THE STATESMANSHIP OF ANWAR EL SADAT

CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY

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The Statesmanship of Anwar el Sadat

Few leaders have faced more daunting challenges than Anwar el Sadat when he ascended to Egypt's presidency in 1970. This courageous statesman appraised his country's dismal situation and then acted in a manner designed to assure Egypt's survival and its leadership role in the Arab community. I will review the facts and assumptions made by President Sadat in the early 1970s, and identify the primary threat to Egypt's national interests. Next, I'll briefly list Sadat's foreign policy objectives, the resources and power he could bring to bear, and his plan to accomplish those objectives. Finally, I will touch on the lessons in statecraft which can be gleaned from the events surrounding the October 1973 war between Egypt and Israel.

Assumptions

The Arabs had been humiliated by their stunning defeat in the 1967 Six Day War with Israel. Egypt alone had more than 11,500 casualties in four days of fighting and lost 80 percent of the military equipment committed to the battle for the Sinai (Dupuy 279, 343). In 1970, one million Arabs lived under Israeli occupation in the Sinai, Gaza Strip, West Bank and Golan Heights. While Arab leaders vowed never to recognize nor negotiate with Israel, Israel signaled her intent to permanently attach the former Arab lands by settling civilians in the occupied territory, especially the Golan Heights and West Bank. Sadat's answer to this settlement was simply that no Arab land could remain in Israeli control (O'Neil 28-31).

Although the Arabs refused to negotiate with Israel, Sadat was frustrated by the perceived inability and unwillingness of the superpowers to restart the stalled peace negotiations. In May of 1972, the superpowers issued a joint statement only calling for "military relaxation" in the region.

Moreover, the communiqués Sadat received from the Soviets indicated that no real progress had been achieved between the superpowers on Middle East questions (Sadat 229)

If he needed more evidence of a stagnate peace process, Sadat learned from secret meetings between his national security advisor and Henry Kissinger, the United States Secretary of State, that Egypt should not expect negotiations which would seriously address Arab concerns. In his memoirs Sadat laments, "It was impossible for the United States (or, indeed, any other power) to make a move if we ourselves didn't take military action to break the deadlock" (238)

Thus, in 1971 Sadat began to speak of the "battle of destiny" and the "year of decision" (O'Neil 32, Dupuy 373). Unfortunately, Egypt's battle of destiny was constrained by a decaying economy and the loss of revenue Egypt once enjoyed from the Suez Canal (Sadat 244). Sadat was further beset by student protests arising from the general uncertainty in the country. He found his own credibility at issue because of his seeming reluctance to engage the "battle of destiny" or to otherwise dislodge the Israelis from Egypt's soil (O'Neil 32, Sadat 245)

The Threat to Egypt's National Interests

With no serious negotiation in the offering, the primary threat to Egypt's national interest was Israel's control of significant portions of Egypt's territory. Moreover, Israel manifested no intention to return it. Obviously, the very survival of a state depends upon the protection of its lands and people. Sadat and the other Arab leaders had publicly announced that not one inch of Arab land could remain in Israel's possession. Unfortunately, even the most accommodating Israeli plan for peace called for the retention of substantial Arab territory (O'Neil 28,29)

Sadat's Foreign Policy Objectives

Sadat's goal then was to raise the peace negotiations from the dead. His expectation was that through earnest negotiation he could ultimately secure the return of Egypt's lost territory. If he

could accomplish that end he would also return Egypt to the role of a leading Arab state. Similarly, Sadat desired a more mature relationship with the Soviet Union. He and his countrymen found the Soviet military advisors to be arrogant and condescending -- a reflection of the official attitude of Moscow toward Egypt (Dupuy 374). Sadat did not want the Soviets to consider Egypt as a client, he wanted to put the Soviet Union "in its natural place as a friendly country, no more and no less" (Sadat 231). Last, Sadat sought to patch the holes in Arab dignity following their sound defeat by Israel and to quell domestic questions about his own credibility (O'Neil 28).

Resources and Power Held by Sadat

The resources available to Sadat to accomplish these goals were largely found among friendly Arab countries. Egypt touted few natural resources, and with the closure of the Suez Canal had lost one of its major sources of revenue. Conversely, other Arab countries knew the power of their oil reserves and had exercised that power to a limited extent in June of 1969 (Dupuy 269). Perhaps Sadat's greatest source of power was his close ties with the leaders of most Arab nations. Sadat sought to cement his ties with his Arab brethren and made a special effort to enhance his influence with the leaders of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Algeria (O'Neil 31, Sadat 239). He knew that the combined military and economic might of the Arab nations was formidable. Sadat even accepted over a billion dollars from Libya, a country with whom he had a sometimes strained relationship. He used the funds from Libya to buy arms from the Soviet Union (Dupuy 376). Equally important to Sadat was the superpower desire for peace in the region. Sadat used that bit of knowledge as a safety net to enhance his otherwise limited and constrained power.

The Ends Used to Accomplish the Means

To accomplish his policy objectives, Sadat employed a wide array of foreign policy tools. As noted earlier, he sought to align his friends, but he also sought to isolate his enemy. In an effort to

strengthen his position, Sadat convinced the Arab world to again stage an oil boycott. Admittedly, the oil weapon was not as effective as it could have because it was not universally observed by all of the Arab states. Nevertheless, the oil boycott did have a psychological impact on the oil consuming world and was the catalyst for Japan and most of the European Economic Community to support Arab demands (Herzog 323, O'Neil 31).

In September 1973, Sadat secured a resolution calling for the return of Arab land at the Fourth Conference of Non-Aligned countries (O'Neil 31, Sadat 240). By October of 1973, 80 percent of African nations had severed relations with Israel, and most third world countries supported the Arabs (O'Neil 1, Sadat 240). By Sadat's reckoning, he had secured the support of over one hundred countries in the ten month period before the October 1973 war (Sadat 240). With the notable exception of the United States, Israel was diplomatically isolated.

Despite his diplomatic successes, Sadat saw little hope for a quick peace settlement with terms acceptable to Egypt. He resorted to war with Israel as the one instrument that he could employ to achieve his primary foreign policy objective. A successful military campaign would enable Egypt to bargain from a position of increased strength and shore up Sadat's credibility not only in the international arena but on the home front as well (O'Neil 28, 31). Having decided on war as the policy of choice, Sadat sought to retake parts of the territory claimed by the Arab countries, to inflict severe losses on Israel, and to ensure that the superpowers were engaged in the resolution of the peace process (O'Neil 32, Dupuy 387). His underlying goal remained to compel the United States to bring pressure on Israel to settle the long-standing dispute on terms amenable to Egypt (O'Neil 32). To end the political stalemate, Sadat placed his country in harm's way. In the words of Henry Kissinger, "Rare is the statesman who at the beginning of a war has so clear a perception of its political objective, rarer still is a war fought to lay the basis for moderation in its aftermath" (460).

To ready his country for war, Sadat shored up fortifications near the Suez canal and developed contingency plans for operation of factories and power stations in the event of war related damage (Sadat 237, 241) More importantly, twice during the summer of 1973 Sadat launched media campaigns which caused the Israeli military to mobilize at significant cost, but the attack never came These "cry wolf" tactics had the telling effect of lulling Israel and the rest of the world into largely ignoring Egypt's preparations for actual war in October (Sadat 242)

In addition to preparing his countrymen for war, Sadat used the prospect of military action to refine Egypt's relationship with the Soviet Union In April of 1972, Sadat rejected as non-responsive a Soviet message which had been offered as an analysis of the Middle East situation Sadat found the message offensive in delivery, form and content He was offended as the message did not address the Soviet Union's failure to deliver the military weapons Sadat had requested In response to the perceived slight, Sadat expelled all Soviet military advisers from Egypt and demanded that the Soviets either sell to him all Soviet owned equipment located in Egypt (including four MIG-25 aircraft) or remove the equipment from the country within one week The Soviets elected the later course of action (Sadat 230, 231)

Despite these actions Sadat did not wish to completely sever his ties with the Soviet Union and granted a five year extension of an agreement permitting the Soviet Mediterranean Fleet access to certain of Egypt's maritime facilities (Sadat 237, 238) For their part the Soviets were only too aware that Egypt could not achieve a complete military victory and expected to intervene if needed to avoid an Arab rout (Herzog 196)

Finally, on the third day of October 1973, Sadat notified the Soviet ambassador that Egypt, in concert with Syria, would initiate military operations against Israel His rationale for starting the war was especially telling -- "to break the present deadlock " Although Sadat declined to name a

date certain for the start of military action, he did convey a sense of urgency and inquired as to the probable Soviet response to the imminent military action. The Soviets gave no direct reply to Sadat's question, but instead sought and received permission from Sadat to evacuate four airplane loads of Soviet dependents living in Egypt. The message was clear: Egypt could not win the fight or even protect its remaining territory (Sadat 247-249). Nevertheless, by maximizing the element of surprise, Egypt did enjoy early success in the war (O'Neil 32). In his memoirs, President Sadat records that Egypt's air force acquired 90 percent of their targets which set the stage for subsequent "victory" (249).

During the evening on the first day of the war, the Soviet ambassador broached the subject of a cease-fire which he alleged originated from Syria. Sadat found such a request attributed to his ally to be incredible and dismissed it as untrue and without merit. At that meeting and a similar one the following day, Sadat again demonstrated his independence from the Soviets by declaring no cease-fire could take place before his objective was achieved. In his words, Egypt must "shatter the Israeli theory of security" before he would entertain cease-fire talks (254).

Seven days after the beginning of the war, Sadat was again able to assert his power as the head of a leading Arab state. The British Ambassador to Egypt conveyed a message from Henry Kissinger who wished to confirm a Soviet assertion that Egypt would accept a cease-fire. Sadat's reply was blunt and two-fold: (1) only Cairo (and not Moscow) spoke for Egypt, and (2) a cease-fire was not possible until the "tasks in the plan" had been accomplished. Sadat then summarily reiterated the possibility for a cease-fire only if Israel agreed to tender over the occupied Arab territory (Sadat 258).

Within days of the departure of the British ambassador, Premier Kosygin of the Soviet Union met with Sadat in Egypt to revisit cease-fire possibilities. In a somewhat acrimonious setting during

the first of several meetings, Sadat expressed his frustration over the non-delivery of Soviet military equipment, notably tanks. He also accused the Soviets of providing him with poor equipment which left him seriously behind the Israeli Army in armament (Sadat 259)

During Kosygin's visit to the Middle East, Egypt suffered serious reversals in the field. Egypt's advance into the Sinai had been stopped and an Israeli counterattack appeared successful. These setbacks to Sadat prompted Kosygin to opine that Egypt was in peril, and he again suggested a cease-fire. As he did not share Kosygin's assessment of the war, Sadat demurred and steadfastly refused to consider a cease-fire until the completion of his war plan (Sadat 259)

Complicating Sadat's war fighting plan was his perception the United States had supplied the Israeli war machine with "hundreds of tanks near the front lines." Sadat was convinced the United States was using a captured Sinai airport to off-load tanks which could be quickly thrust into action (Sadat 260). In fact, the United States probably introduced no more than five new tanks into the war and studiously avoided using former Egyptian airstrips. Sadat's intelligence was correct to the extent it indicated the United States had supplied significant stocks of ammunition, antitank weapons, rockets and airborne missiles to Israel by the 13th of October (Dupuy 568, 576). Sadat's recognition that the United States was clearly committed to the survival of the state of Israel, coupled with the re-supply of munitions and equipment, nudged him to now seek a cease-fire. He could not battle the United States, and his goal to prod the superpowers to seriously reenter the peace negotiations had been met (Sadat 261)

Ultimately when the sand settled, Egypt did manage some territorial gain on the east bank of the Suez canal. Conversely, Syria, Egypt's hapless ally, did not fare as well. Israel had gained additional miles of Syrian soil (O'Neil 32). This seemingly mixed bag of results did not dissuade Sadat from claiming victory. In his words, "that victory restored the self-confidence of our armed

forces, our people, and our Arab Nation. It also restored the world's confidence in us, and exploded forever the myth of an invincible Israel." (Sadat 24)

Lessons Learned

What lessons can be learned from a study of the events leading to the October War? Two immediately come to mind. First, any grand strategy becomes unraveled if the underlying factual assumptions are faulty. Simply put, erroneous assumptions beget bad policy, and this case study offers several examples.

Most countries, including United States, Soviet Union, and Israel, underestimated Sadat's resolve and Egypt's capabilities. As noted above most experts thought Israel too strong to be attacked by Egypt. Moreover, Sadat's rhetoric was discounted by Israel and others. He proclaimed each year after 1970 as the "year of decision", but each year passed without military action (Kissinger 460, Dupuy 373). Likewise, the expelling of the Soviet advisors helped hide Sadat's true intention. The list of fooled players included the Soviets and Sadat's War Minister who Sadat discharged as ineffectual in November of 1972 (Sadat 229, 230, 236). Similarly, Israel and the United States independently concluded that Egypt and Syria lacked the military strength to regain their territory. Thus, given that the Arabs could not win such a war, they would not attack (Kissinger 459).

Clearly the analysis was wrong. Whereas Sadat understood he could not win the war, winning the war was not necessary. Sadat needed only to start one. Significantly, the Egyptian army had no operational plan once they crossed the Suez canal other than to hold the ground (Kissinger 459, Dupuy 390). Sadat knew he could count on some measure of protection from the Soviet Union. Moreover, given the superpowers demonstrated interest in the Middle East, he gambled that any military action would kick-start the stalled peace negotiations. He was right.

A case can also be advanced, if not conclusively proved, that the Soviets overestimated Egypt's dependence upon them. By their actions and arrogance, the Soviets suggested that Egypt was submissive to Soviet influence. This miscalculation ultimately resulted in a deteriorated relationship between the two countries.

The second lesson was not one learned but was relearned -- the military instrument is employed when diplomatic tools are ineffectual. Kissinger writes that through military action, Sadat accomplished his goal of restoring Arab dignity and undermining Israel's feeling of invincibility (Kissinger 459). This psychological reversal permitted Egypt to come to the negotiating table with an enhanced position of strength and leadership in the Arab world. Important also were the losses suffered by Israel which provided the wake up call needed for the Israeli leadership to be more amenable to negotiations with the Arab nations. Less aggressive means simply could not accomplish the same result.

By demonstrating the courage to fight a war he could not win, Anwar el Sadat energized a stalled peace process and ultimately regained the lost Egyptian territory. He found a way for Arabs to regain their dignity. His plan enabled Egypt to resume its leadership role in the Arab community as a mature nation and not as a puppet of the Soviet Union. His statesmanship utilized the entire spectrum of policy tools and offers valuable lessons for the student of national security strategy.

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